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Approved For Release 2004/07/08 : CIA-RDP79T00912A002700010018-1

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# Africa Review

Supplement  
6 October 1978

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RP AR 78-010C

6 October 1978

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AFRICA REVIEW  
SUPPLEMENT

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With the prospect for continued military stalemate in Eritrea and the Ogaden and a further erosion of Ethiopian morale and combat effectiveness, Mengistu may be compelled to decide whether to continue his present strategy, request greater Soviet and Cuban aid, or enter negotiations with the Eritreans.

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Implications of the Current Situation in Eritrea and  
the Ogaden: Mengistu's Options

The Military Situation

Ethiopian forces have lost the initiative in Eritrea and are clearly on the defensive in the Ogaden. Serious logistic difficulties on both fronts have been accompanied by a sharp drop in troop morale.

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The prospect is for continued military stalemate in Eritrea and the Ogaden, with a further erosion of Ethiopian morale and combat effectiveness. Under such circumstances, the Mengistu regime may be compelled to reexamine its policy options. We have no hard evidence that such a review is under way, but Mengistu undoubtedly discussed his dilemma at length with Cuban President Castro and Soviet delegation leader Kuznetsov during celebrations in Addis Ababa in mid-September marking the fourth anniversary of the Ethiopian revolution.

Mengistu's Options

Mengistu has been a consistent hardliner on Eritrea and the Ogaden and, from all indications, remains determined to resolve both conflicts through military means. Moscow and Havana, however, whose military support is absolutely essential to the accomplishment of Mengistu's objectives in Eritrea and the Ogaden, are believed to continue to favor negotiations for a political settlement--at least in Eritrea.

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Faced with this dilemma, Mengistu, in our view, has three basic options, none of which are mutually exclusive:

- Continue his present military strategy under existing levels of external support.
- Request greater Soviet and Cuban military assistance to support a tougher, more aggressive policy in both Eritrea and the Ogaden.
- Enter negotiations for a political settlement in Eritrea.

Mengistu and other like-minded senior officers on the ruling military council probably have the will and motivation to persevere at present combat levels in the face of continued adversity on both fronts, but it is highly questionable whether that determination is shared at the battalion, company, and platoon level where the real fighting takes place. [REDACTED]

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We do not believe that Ethiopia can continue to effectively fight, much less win, a two-front war on the current scale of combat operations. Government forces do not appear to have either the training, experience, leadership, or motivation to decisively engage or defeat the enemy. The Ethiopians will continue to sustain heavy losses of both personnel and equipment--as well as suffer a further erosion of troop morale--in both sectors if, as we expect, the stalemated military situation of the past six weeks continues indefinitely.

Faced with these unpromising prospects, the odds are that Mengistu will lean hard on the Soviets and Cubans to be more generous with direct combat assistance in both Eritrea and the Ogaden. Moscow and Havana, for soundly based foreign policy reasons, are clearly eager to see the Eritrean conflict brought to a speedy conclusion--preferably through negotiations. Nevertheless, they have put their prestige, money, and guns on the line

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in Mengistu's behalf, and a debacle in Eritrea or the Ogaden, or both, would be a major defeat for them as well as for Mengistu.

We believe that the Cubans, with Moscow's approval, might be willing to resume active offensive operations in the Ogaden, where they maintain in garrison an 8,600-man division-sized combat force. This force could make a major contribution to the restoration of security in the Ogaden by conducting antiguerrilla sweeps and road-clearing operations, while at the same time continuing to serve as the major deterrent to another Somalia invasion. The risks of incurring heavy casualties during such operations would be low, a factor that would almost certainly weigh heavily in any Cuban decision to return to the offensive. Havana, moreover, could justify its renewed military activities politically by once again arguing that it was merely helping Ethiopia deter external aggression.

As for Eritrea,

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Havana realizes that direct involvement in the Eritrean fighting would not only risk heavy casualties but jeopardize important ties with radical Arab states and Cuban aspirations for leadership of the non-aligned movement. In our view, however, the Cubans might be persuaded to increase their combat support effort in Eritrea;

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It is also possible that the Cubans, with Soviet concurrence, and diplomatic consequences notwithstanding, might be willing to provide limited direct participation by Cuban combat troops in a final Ethiopian drive to take Keren--the last remaining major stronghold still under insurgent control. Under this scenario, the quid pro quo for help in securing Keren might be Ethiopian agreement to enter into serious negotiations with the Eritrean guerrillas. Direct Cuban involvement, even though limited in size and duration, might also serve to intimidate the insurgents into deciding to come to the bargaining

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table. The recapture of Keren, with Cuban help, would put the Ethiopians in a strong bargaining position and might led some Eritrean insurgents to give serious consideration to negotiations in the belief that the situation could only get worse.

Discreet exploratory discussions between the Ethiopians and the Marxist-oriented Eritrean People's Liberation Front--the largest and most powerful of the three guerrilla factions--have been under way for some time, but the talks have made little progress. Neither side has been willing to offer significant concessions: the Eritreans continue to demand self-determination, while the Ethiopians insist on a vaguely defined form of local autonomy within the framework of Ethiopian sovereignty. Battlefield realities, coupled with strong diplomatic pressure by the Soviets, Cubans, Sudanese, and other interested supporters of both sides, might eventually persuade the belligerents to adopt more flexible negotiating positions.

While negotiating is a viable option--at some point--for the Ethiopians in their dispute with the Eritreans, there is no prospect for a political settlement with Somalia over the conflict in the Ogaden. Before any talks--even of an exploratory nature--can begin, Ethiopia demands that Somalia cease its support for guerrilla activities in the Ogaden, publicly and formally renounce its irredentist ambitions in the Horn, and pay reparations for war damages in the Ogaden. The Somalis, for their part, continue to demand autonomy for all inhabitants of the Ogaden and show no willingness to abandon their support for the guerrillas.

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